**Weekly Express-News Article**

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**“Tomatoes, What Now?”**

Area gardeners should be close to harvesting fruit. Some may already be harvesting cherry tomatoes or larger tomatoes affected by blossom-end rot. There are a number of issues to consider now to bring the fruit down the home stretch and into your kitchen.

Blossom-end Rot – This is the problem that produces tomatoes with black, hard bottoms. It is caused by a break in the stream of calcium into the plant during the growth stage.

It usually occurs on tomatoes that are developing when we have a significant increase in temperatures from one day to the next. It also occurs when the soil is allowed to dry-out between waterings.

The fruit with blossom-end rot is not attractive but it can be eaten. Gardeners usually cut-off the black and eat the rest because blossom-end rot tomatoes are the first to ripen and early in the season we are desperate for our first tomatoes.

The key to preventing blossom-end rot is keeping the soil moist. Calcium additives are not usually a help because our soil is loaded with calcium. The problem is usually an issue of early season development, so there is no special action to take now.

Spider Mites – Spider mites live on the bottoms of the leaves and suck juices from the plant to make their living. The symptom that results is a faded, dusty looking leaf that is eventually covered with webs. Development of fruit is affected by spider mite infection and stops completely in severe infections.

Since the removal of kelthane from the market, there is no effective treatment of spider mite infection.

The population of the destructive pests can be slowed by sprays of seaweed extract (2 tablespoons per gallon of water) applied under the leaves every week. When the mites appear increase the frequency of spray to twice per week. Some gardeners also use neem oil applied separately as part of their spider mite control.

Discard spider mite infected plants in the garbage or in an active compost pile far from the vegetable garden to reduce the chance of re-infection.

Early Blight – Early blight is a fungal disease that expresses itself by causing the stems on a tomato plant to start dying from the bottom-up. To slow down development of the disease the fungicide chlorothalonil can be applied once per week.

Stinkbugs – These insects inject their digestive juices into the tomato stem and then ingest the “stew” that results. The attack causes the formation of a lumpy surface of scar tissue that is often colored with yellow and red splotches. The result of a stinkbug attack is unpleasant but the fruit can be eaten if you don’t mind the “look” and the chewy tissue!

Stinkbugs are relatively hard to kill. Sevin and malathion usually work best.

Pinworms – Pinworms are the small worms that enter the tomato fruit to feed. The fruit collapses around their feeding area and becomes an unappetizing mess.

Some gardeners try to use a Bt product to control the larvae but I have not found it to be effective. What does work is a preventive spray of Spinosad or Sevin. Once the worm has entered the fruit, there is no treatment.

Hornworms – Hornworms and their damage are easy to recognize but unfortunately, we only realize the large destructive caterpillars are there, when they have stripped the plant of foliage.

To control hornworms they must be sought out and removed by hand at first sign of foliage damage. Spraying with a Bt product such as Dipel, Bio-worm control, or Thuricide works well if you do not wait too long. Sevin or malathion also works.

Squirrels – Some squirrels get very fond of tomatoes and adept at removing them from the plant. If the volume of damage is not too great you may chose to share. The only other option I know is to trap the culprit with a live trap and remove him/her from the vicinity.

Birds – Mockingbirds and other species will peck at and eat ripening tomatoes. Usually their damage is limited but you can cover the plants with a bird net. Some gardeners say they have been effective with rubber snakes or owls as a deterrent.

Rats – Squirrels, rabbits, and birds often get blamed for damage done by rats. The pesky rodents are common in many neighborhoods and thrive along with other wildlife in a bountiful landscape. Baited traps work to reduce the population. They can be purchased at feed stores and even supermarkets. Only use traps or poison boxes in the garden that will not accidentally catch birds. Professional exterminators are often the best solution.

Viruses – There are several viruses that attack tomatoes. Among the symptoms are plant dwarfing, crinkly leaves, yellowing, and discolored small fruit. Viruses are spread by thrips, whiteflies, and other insects.

Preventive sprays of Spinosad or Sevin will kill the insects but all it takes is one hit by the insect to inject the disease. Some gardeners protect the plants from the tiny, virus-carrying insects with agricultural fabric enclosures on the tomato cages (see [www.plantanswers.com](http://www.plantanswers.com)). For this to work requires that the fabric be in place when the plants are first put in the garden.

The best way to avoid damage from virus diseases is to select disease resistant varieties. Tycoon is the variety that is recommended when yellow tomato wilt virus is a problem.

The bad news is there is not much we can do to control viruses at this point. The good news is that viruses often only attack a small portion of the plants in a garden. Remove infected plants to the active compost pile.